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ABSTRACT

This paper considers briefly some of the changes in values over the past 50 years. It indicates that the old-fashioned values concerning thrift; the need for human community; the rewards of love, marriage, and fidelity; the spaciousness of the globe; the proper content for English; and the fitness of public education have dwindled in importance as technological and social changes have produced previously unthought of changes in human lives. The paper concludes with the faint hope that perhaps some of those values may yet return with a new vitality. (TJ)

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DUMPING ACCUMULATED MENTAL DEBRIS, OR GEARING DOWN AT FIFTY

Edmund J. Farrell

Not many months ago my wife and I were forced to clean house, a process compelled by a change of jobs and an 1100 mile move. Out went chipped plates, never-to-be-read books, a tattered sofa, broken toys, his and her threadbare or unstylish apparel ("My gawd, why did you ever buy that?"), warped records, a grossly overstuffed, bile-green chair, and a bassinet that had seen its days, at least in our house. The best of the lot went to a garage sale; the worst, to the garbage.

The psychological relief that followed hard upon our purge of tangible but unserviceable goods led me to consider what far greater relief I might experience were I to shed myself of some of the antiquated notions I have been accumulating and storing since childhood, notions which, though perhaps not heavy as in "That's heavy, man," have nevertheless been weighing me down. The more I played with the notion of publicly jettisoning obsolete notions, the more it appealed. Now that I have crossed the far side of fifty and have become, at least in my pre-teenagers' views, an authority on "the olden times," I believe I have earned the right to trim sail, to approach with no excess baggage the short end of the countdown to my allotted three score and ten.

I present to you, then, free for the taking, assumptions, professional dicta, and good advice I no longer have use for.

I start with my childhood, one played out in the Depression, and with my father's recitation to me of Polonius' advice to Laertes. Though I was later to learn, as my father never did, that Polonious was more than a bit of a bumbling fool, one given to writing down the sage words of others so that he might later unload them at what we would now call "prime time," I was nonetheless taken by the line, "Neither a borrower nor a lender

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be."

For decades I attempted to use that pithy advice as a lodestar to steer me clear of the shoals of profligacy and bankruptcy. As I matured, eating sparingly, dressing simply, and tithing myself regularly for savings account #2241, I watched the chums of my childhood grow rich. Their minds uncluttered by early 17th Century Dun and Bradstreet insights, they bought homes, cars, boats, and investment properties, mortgaging themselves, spouses, and progeny at the usurious rates of three to five percent. Buying low and selling high, taking fliers by refinancing at rates as larcenous as seven percent, they dug tax shelters even as they traveled abroad. Last week I lectured my eleven-year-old when I found him stuffing nickles into the piggybank some backward child had given him for his birthday. This week he is memorizing current market advice: "A penny saved is a penny gone," for as TRB recently informed readers of The New Republic (Sept. 9, 1978), a dollar worth 100 cents at the end of President Truman's term was worth 77 cents by the end of President Johnson's term, 41 cents by the end of President Ford's term, and is now worth 38 cents under President Carter. Sic transit U. S. Treasury bonds.

My father was not alone in providing worthless wisdom for the late Twentieth Century. My mother was a compulsive saver, a habit she tried assiduously to instill in my brother, sister, and me. Forever putting things away for a rainy day (we lived in sunny California), she had drawers full of tinfoil, bags, string, candle stubs, paper bags, and rubber bands; cabinets filled with empty jelly jars and coffee cans, and a garage piled with newspapers and boxes. She ill-prepared us for maturity in a nation capable of annually abandoning on city streets

hundreds of thousands of automobiles; of depositing along its highways and byways millions of plastic containers, no-deposit bottles and aluminum cans; and of spending billions of dollars each year to burn or dump its garbage.

Great believers in roots, both my father and my mother admonished us to settle down in a community, participate in its affairs, and get to know our neighbors. Though transplanted Montanans, my parents managed to remain in the same California town from their early thirties to their deaths--in my father's case, for 32 years; in my mother's, for 41. Though I share their values and have tried to heed their advice, the longest I have lived in a community is 11 years, a period far longer than is true for most contemporary Americans. In her column of April 16, 1978, Sylvia Porter reminded her readers of how mobile the society is at present:

> Although the proportion of U.S. families moving in 1978 alone will be 1 out of 5 of us, the proportion in the 22-24 age bracket will be nearly 50 percent; for newly married Americans, the mobility rate will be a fantastic 84 percent; and for executives in their 30s, the rate will soar to a near-incredible 97 percent.

Need I tell you that after a time, persons on the move suffer profound psychological damage. Feeling an ongoing sense of dislocation, that of being forced forever to drive down unknown streets and to communicate always with strangers, they retreat into themselves. Neither adults nor children can endure deserting, or being deserted by, best friend upon best friend without consciously or unconsciously deciding they will no longer emotionally invest themselves in the creation and maintenance of close relationships. Alvin Toffler informs us in Future Shock

that middle-class parents in this society prepare their children for frequent desertion by leaving the youngsters in the care of babysitters chosen in serial fashion. It is small wonder that we are, as David Reisman noted decades ago, a lonely crowd, our sense of self-worth dependent from childhood through old age upon those we hardly know and cannot care deeply about.

The facile ability to initiate and dissolve casual relationships, learned in childhood, we now display in marriage, a relationship my parents and their generation regarded as binding till the death of one's partner. Faith once invested in nuptial vows appears at present to be invested in the skill and rapidity with which lawyers can terminate a marriage contract: in the brief twelve-year span from 1965 to 1977 alone, the divorce rate in the United State doubled, from 2.5 to 5 per 1,000 population. Forty percent of marriages among women now in their late twenties will end in divorce if current trends continue. Since the great majority of those who divorce later remarry, sociologists and anthropologists inform us that we need to help young people view any marriage as a temporary commitment that can be readily dissolved if the condition of either partner's life substantially alters. Serial baby-sitters, followed in time by serial spouses.

Complimenting a waning faith in marriage as an institution has been the growing practice among young couples of living together without ceremony of wedding. According to the Bureau of Census, almost twice as many unmarried couples live together now as did eight years ago, the latest estimate being close to 1,000,000 pairs. And despite the increased use of more effective birth-control methods, the annual number of illegiti-

mate births continues to rise, from 90,000 per year (or 3.6% of all births) in 1940 to almost 450,000 (or 14.3% of all births) in 1975--figures that help undermine one's belief that science and its technological byproducts are ineluctable forces of progress.

Those concerned about the direction the society is headed with regard to love, marriage, family, and racial relationships need to be attentive to values promulgated by the popular media, particularly by such films as Saturday Night Fever, Grease, and Animal House--all highly regarded by the young. What T. S. Eliot said about popular literature holds equally true for popular film. In his essay "Religion and Literature," Mr. Eliot writes:

> ...I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for "amusement," or "purely for pleasure" that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us. It is the literature which we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us. Hence it is that the influence of popular novelists, and of popular plays of contemporary life, requires to be scrutinized most closely....

Doubting Thomases when it came to scientific matters that appeared to border on the miraculous, both my parents seemed to take as axiomatic that what exists is principally what one sees. For years my father, who was in the wholesale electric business and should have known better, was convinced that the development of television wasn't possible. Then he knew that, though possible, television could never become so inexpensive as to be popular. His last years he spent, like the bulk of America, regularly watching sports events, talk shows, and situation comedies, willing to let others explain how the impossible had become commonplace.

The belief that 99% of worldly reality is perceivable had held true for hundreds of years. As Buckminster Fuller informed a CEE audience

in Milwaukee in 1971, only from the last century on have we come to realize that 99% of reality is the imperceptible electro-magnetic grid which surrounds us and through which we move. It is that grid which has made possible telegraph, telephone, radio, television, computer, satellite communications, and, increasingly, micro-circuitry and micro-communications systems. Further, it is that invisible grid, in combination with jet travel, which persistently and appreciably has been altering the content and teaching of English.

When I departed the university in 1951, MA fresh in hand, to teach in the public schools, I was convinced from the courses I had taken that English was principally a body of literature, 90% of it composed by authors who had lived and died in England. I had taken only two courses in American literature and only one in language study--a graduate course in philology. In the past two decades we have witnessed an explosion of scholarship in language study and in American literature, not only that written by Anglo-Americans but also that written by Asian-Americans, Afro-Americans, and Mexican-Americans. Contributing to, if not the impetus for, much contemporary linguistic and literary scholarship has been the ability of television to make visible the heretofore invisible among us--to make us conscious of the poor and of non-white minorities, groups too often synonymous--and to make those same groups desirous to share in the power and affluence of America, which television nightly makes visible to them.

Further stimulating recent scholarship has been television's capacity to bring remote corners of the globe instantaneously into living rooms, dens, and bedrooms. As a child, I considered a 55 mile trip to San Francisco, complete with ferryboat ride, a day's adventure, and a visit to grandmother's home in Montana was no less than a summer's epic.

In contrast, during the past decade I have been witness through the flick of a dial to Presidential visits to mainland China and to the Middle East, to the investiture of Popes, to uprisings in Iran and South Africa, to the belated retreat from Viet Nam and the disgrace of Watergate, to men walking and talking on the moon. Moreover, thanks to inexpensive excursion fares, I have twice traveled in Europe with my family, a prospect undreamed of in my youth. The undeniable finiteness of the world we inhabit and are now forced to bear witness to, combined with the free flow of tourists abroad, among them scholars, has led to rising numbers of literary works in translation and to a broadened definition of English literature, one which encompasses works written in English not alone in England and the United States, but in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Rhodesia, and other nations.

As a youngster, I held a variety of jobs, many of them now automated beyond human hands and minds--pin setter in a bowling alley, elevator operator in a hotel, warehouseman for the railroad, line worker in the bottling room of a brewery. Sensitive to the swiftness with which computers and other electrically operated equipment have displaced workers in other fields, I worry that teachers of English, driven by the pressures of the "back-to-basics" movement, may render themselves obsolete within a decade. Lately I have been observing teachers expending class time day after day upon drill exercises in usage, spelling, syntax, and vocabulary--exercises that in a short time will be more patiently and thoroughly taught by machine, from hand calculators to television terminals in the home.

Already one can purchase from Texas Instruments for $9.89 the Little Professor, a calculator programmed to teach youngsters computational skills;

for $19.90, one can own the Spelling B Electronic Learning Aid, which uses word/picture association techniques and is programmed with three levels of difficulty for grades K-4; and for $55.00 one can possess "Speak & Spell," which has the 200 words most often misspelled by children ages 7 through 12 stored in its two memory banks. The youngster spells the words on an alphabetic keyboard, the device pronounces the words correctly, presents quizzes and games to stimulate interest, and delivers verbal praise to maintain motivation. Also on the market is a talking calculator for the blind, selling for $395.00. Although it appears to be an ordinary pocket calculator, when the user enters on the keyboard "2 + 2 = ?," the machine says, "Two plus two equals four." Called the Speech Plus, the calculator handles with a memory bank all four basic functions, plus floating constant, movable decimal, root and percentages. This past September, Matsushita Electrical Industries of Japan announced production of a pocket-sized television set with a liquid crystal display. The set weighs about 1 and 1/2 pounds, is 4 and 1/2 inches wide, 1 and 1/4 inches deep, and less than 5 inches long. The firm plans to market the black and white set within two years for about $525.00.

With the continuing development of Intelsat and Comsat Communication satellites, with two-way communications already a reality through interactive CATV, with a single fiber optic cable capable of carrying up to 50,000 voice channels as compared to 5,400 voice channels for a standard coaxial cable, it is patent fact that communication systems are undergoing a persistent revolution, one that has already transformed, and will further transform, the subject we teach and the lives we lead. Unless we see as

central to English the study of language and literature as human phenomena requiring for their understanding and appreciation face-to-face human dialogue, we may shortly join the ranks of the irrelevant and the forgotten. Lest we think that not possible, I remind you that as late as the period from 1921-25, College Board administered more Latin tests than English tests.

Despite monumental changes since World War II in the society's institutions, values, means of transportation, and media of communication, the school, as an institution, has changed little. Before entering the teaching force in 1951, I had been persuaded by professors of education that I was about to enter a profession. It took me only one week in a high school in the Mother Lode country of California to realize that the only professionals in the building were the administrators, for only they were surrounded by the human and mechanical aides one encounters in the quarters of businessmen, doctors, and lawyers--adequate secretarial help, telephones, and office machines. Though I could not then imagine a time when 240 teachers would be jailed for striking, as occurred in Bridgeport, Conn., in September 1978, I was naive. For public education has an institutionally built-in adversarial relationship between administration and faculty, a relationship archaic for our times and detrimental to the achievement of educational goals.

In Education and the Cult of Efficiency (University of Chicago, 1962), Raymond Callahan persuasively makes the case that until the turn of this century, an educational administrator was essentially an educational philosopher, a person who articulated the curriculum to the community on philosophical grounds. But with the growth of industry in this country, with the tax monies for the schools being predicated

largely on taxes on industry, and with the time-motion studies conducted in industry by Frederick Taylor, Frank Gilbreth and others, administrators increasingly were called upon to defend what was taking place in schools not on the grounds of its philosophical worth but on the grounds of its efficiency. The consequence is that administrators allied themselves with industrial leaders, and instead of interpreting the will of educators to the business community, they were soon interpreting, and enforcing upon educators, the will of businessmen. Within a short time, the school was viewed as being analogous to an industrial plant ("school plant planning"); administrators, rather than being at the service of teachers, were seen as employers; and teachers were treated as workers on an industrial line, responsible for processing so many students ("work load") through so many courses over so many semesters over so many years (Carnegie units), following which students were labeled as products of the institution.

Buckminster Fuller once observed that this nation cannot purge itself of its technology. Were it to dump all its technological equipment into the oceans, millions of human beings would starve to death within six months. However, added Mr. Fuller, if we were to send our politicians into orbit, we might have an earth renewal. The time nears, I believe, when we must act as though we had rocketed our present educational system beyond our galaxy, with not so much as a remnant remaining. Then we must rethink what education should be in this society, as it now is and as we wish it to become.

Unburdened of old-fashioned notions about the importance of thrift; the need for human community; the rewards of love, marriage, and fidelity; the spaciousness of the globe; the proper content for English, and the

fitness of public education as an institution for our times, I conclude my address lighter of concept but not perforce of spirit. Some ideas and some values I relinquish most reluctantly, particularly those relating to marriage, family, and community. Although "Here today and gone tomorrow" seems the only saw appropriate to the age, I seek out exceptions, including signs that moribund values may yet be revitalized. After all, we still retell the myth of the phoenix, and Warriner's Handbooks, after being twice entombed, first by Fries and then by Chomsky, have been resurrected and revived.

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